

SEVEN QUESTIONS

On Faith, Gender, and the Church



Brought to you by the

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Our church family has been studying and prayerfully reflecting on women's roles in our public gatherings since 1988. Our concern has been how best to understand and apply the scriptural principle that there is neither male nor female in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28). We want to be true to Scripture. And as part of our being true to Scripture, we recognize our responsibility to outsiders seeking faith (in the spirit of Matt. 9:9-13; 1 Cor. 9:19-23; and Titus 2:3-10). Since 1993 we have circulated these questions broadly among members and leaders of the Churches of Christ nationwide. And the decisions we make concerning faith and gender continue to be driven by these basic questions.

1. Concerning those texts traditionally used to restrict or silence women in our worship assemblies, 1 Cor. 14:33-35 and 1 Tim. 2:11-15, which approach to biblical interpretation is most consistent, honest and therefore valid? Do we simply accept them at face value separate from their literary and historical context? Or do we determine to the best of our ability the original intent of the writer, in this case, Paul, by reconstructing as accurately as we can the real-life context using all the linguistic, literary, and historical insights available to us?

With regard to many practices—to cite a few examples, foot washing, speaking in tongues, the holy kiss, and female adornment—clearly we have relied upon establishing original intent. Consider, for instance, how on an issue like tongue speaking—"I would like everyone of you to speak in tongues" (1 Cor. 14:5)—we point quickly to historical context and original intent, noting that Paul was addressing the specific circumstances of his day. The truth is that sound biblical interpretation has always relied upon the best knowledge of historical context available. Perhaps the real question occurs when we break from our usual pattern and on a particular issue downplay context and original intent: when we do this, what is really motivating us?

So what is the principle of selectivity we have used to

justify not washing one another's feet, not greeting with a holy kiss, not laying on hands, women not wearing veils, women disregarding injunctions against braided hair or expensive clothes, while still insisting women be silent in our public worship? And why?

On what basis can we justify appealing to original intent on so many other matters and largely disregarding original intent for 1 Cor. 14:33-35 and 1 Tim. 2:11-15?

When we pick and choose sometimes from within the same passage (e.g. 1 Tim. 2:9-15) those matters to which we will apply the letter of the law (while disregarding historical context) and those to which we will not, we are not being objective, reasonable, or consistent. We here in Stamford and in many other places are trying to find a consistent principle of interpretation so that we will not simply be picking and choosing on the basis of personal whim, masculine bias, or cultural tradition.

2. Since we would no longer use the teaching "Slaves, obey your earthly masters" (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-41; Titus 2:9-10) to defend slavery, why would we continue to use 1 Cor 14:33-35 or 1 Tim. 2:9-15 to silence women's voices in our worship assemblies?

The New Testament teaching on slavery gives us a real-life example of what early Christians did with another dominant social pattern of those times. If the church then had pressed the teaching of Gal. 3:28 and Philemon as well as its more general message of liberation to its full conclusion, it would have been undermining the economic foundation of the Roman world. Slavery was a constant—a given—in the ancient world. Life would have been unimaginable without it. If the church then had energetically pressed this matter, it would have been quickly perceived as being dangerously subversive and a threat to the basic fabric of society. And it would have distracted almost everyone from its primary gospel message. The gospel would have

been buried beneath layers of economic fear and conflict. Today, in our understanding of those passages that urge slaves to obey their masters (1 Cor. 7:17-24; Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-41; Titus 2:9-10; Philemon), we appeal to context and original intent. We do not agree with those who in the early nineteenth century used these passages to defend slavery as a permanent God-ordained institution. And today we see in the biblical teaching on slavery an example of the necessary distinction between what the New Testament says about new life in Christ (Gal. 3:28) and the actual degree of loving implementation possible in the first century. Might not this also be true for gender issues?

3. **To what extent would a woman's public participation in Sunday morning worship be an authority role? And how does our understanding of this square with Jesus' teaching on leadership and authority?**

Do men—any men at all—feel, for instance, that another man "leading" prayer or reading scripture is really exercising authority over them? Is it, in fact, an authority role for anyone to pass collection or communion trays (with or without praying beforehand), offer a prayer, lead a song, make a Sunday morning announcement, or read scripture? In what sense would a woman doing any of these things be "usurping authority" over anyone? And how do these concerns fit in with Jesus' teaching that the one who would become great must be a servant and the one who would be first must be servant of all (Matt. 20:20-28; Mark 10:41-45; Luke 22:24-27; John 13:1-17)? To what extent have we let secular notions of hierarchy, power, and domination shape our perceptions of Christian service in worship?

NOTE: There was a time, several centuries ago, when women in certain churches were not allowed to sing in public assemblies. This of course complies with the strict construction of "remaining silent in the churches" (1 Cor. 14:34) but it seems a bizarre misapplication today.

4. **Is it really reasonable to suppose that the traditional view of female subordination is a guaranteed "safe position"?**

It is sometimes felt that if we hold to positions traditionally held, we are at least doing the "safe" thing in the eyes of God. But if we are unnecessarily (just for the sake of our tradition) holding to a position that now hinders the gospel of Christ (1 Cor. 9:12, 19-23), if by unnecessarily insisting on exclusively male leadership in the church we are keeping people from seeing God's good news and thereby shutting the kingdom of heaven in their faces (Matt. 23:13), would we not then be answerable to God for doing what we consider to be the safe thing?

Furthermore, if by holding to traditional positions, we prevent women from exercising their God-given talents, might we not also be held accountable for that? One cannot overemphasize the enormous consequences of women today—for the very first time in history—being generally as educated as men and as trained for responsible leadership in society. The barriers that once kept them from leadership roles are now gone—except in certain churches for an hour or two a week. If the implications of this are still not clear to us, they will be to our daughters and our sons. But there are already in many congregations women who are more educated, more knowledgeable in Scripture, and more gifted as adult teachers than most of the men. Sometimes a woman may be more educated, knowledgeable and gifted than all the men. If men refuse to learn from such women purely on the basis of gender, are we not collectively burying their talents—gifts given them by God—at considerable loss to us all? Moreover, what realistically do we expect women to do with such gifts? And realistically how do we expect our daughters (and the men who will marry and love them) to respond to such a situation? If we hold to traditional positions, we will be asking of this generation of women what has never been asked of any generation before: that they accept restrictive and subordinate roles

although they now have education and training for leadership equivalent to men's. Have we fully considered what we are asking of them? Have we anticipated the probable consequences? If we are unnecessarily holding to such a position, would we not be shutting the kingdom of heaven in people's faces? Is this really a "safe position" practically, spiritually, or biblically?

And it's important to recognize that this concern is scriptural as well as practical. It is solidly anchored in both the teaching and model of Paul (1 Cor. 9:19-23; Rom. 12:17; 1 Tim. 3:7; 5:14; 6:1; Titus 2:5,8,10). It is of course true that cardinal Christian doctrines should not be determined by the negative responses of secular people. However, with regard to our teaching on immersion or the Lord's Supper, for instance, no one—however strongly they may disagree with us—suggests that our positions are in any way immoral. (Nor could they really; immersion and the Lord's Supper illuminate the gospel and still very much fulfill the original intent of the inspired writers of Scripture). On the other hand, it is exactly this charge of immorality that traditional churches today must endure rightly or wrongly on the issue of female subordination. People turn to the church to find God, and find themselves more ethical and humane than the church. This is also the same charge that the church faced on slavery in the nineteenth century (when many traditionalists fell back on "Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters" drawn from passages such as 1 Peter 2:18; Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22-4:1; and Titus 2:9-10 to argue for the eternal legitimacy of human slavery). And certainly if the church in history had always conducted itself so as to be safe—as we understand safety today—we would still be a pro-slavery church. And what would be safe about that?

5. **Why is it that women still suffer from wrongs like rape, domestic violence, verbal abuse, and various forms of gender condescension and disrespect?**

What is the responsibility of the church on these matters when men who are not avowed Christians draw on the church's authority to claim a God-given right to dominate and thereby abuse women? And how might churches best contribute to solutions—and make sure that they are not contributing to the problem? How do we so conduct ourselves as a church that a man—any man—comes to respect a woman—any woman—as naturally and as instinctively as he does a man? In many ways, this last question may be the most important question. And our answer to it will do much to determine whether in real life, in our time and place, there is neither male nor female in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).

6. **What does it mean—in the sight of God—to be a man or to be a woman?**

Is it reasonable to assume that the sexual distinctiveness evident in our bodies is restricted to our bodies and does not extend at all into our souls? Given that gender distinctiveness exists, can the case be made for at least certain gender-distinctive roles that either males or females more naturally fill? If this case could be made, would it not follow that society suffers when it ignores this distinctiveness? Before we dismantle all the gender expectations of the past, have we responsibly considered what constructive social functions they once performed and how those functions will be managed in the future? Still, if gender distinctiveness argues for certain gender-distinctive roles, aren't those roles best understood as norms still subject to individual aptitude and immediate context rather than rigid restrictions that allow no exceptions? Wouldn't this be a matter, like so many others, when it is best to understand with the apostle Paul that we are "not under law, but under grace" (Rom 6:14; 7:6)?

Moreover, is it not the very gender distinctiveness of women—that usually they are more gently nurturing—that makes it so spiritually important that their voices be heard

by men and women in our gatherings of believers? If men and women often speak with different voices doesn't this suggest the necessity of both men's and women's voices being heard in churches where life's most sacred issues are addressed?

7. **By fully opening our gatherings to women's voices, are we in any real way diminishing masculinity? Could we be enriching it?**

Take, for instance, the matter of spiritual leadership. What is it in any of these considerations that detracts from teaching and training men to lead, to take initiative, to define agendas, and to struggle courageously for their fulfillment? Does it really require women to assume or play subordinate roles (roles that are often artificial to them and to our culture) in order for men to succeed at leadership?

—Dale Pauls
10/98